

Journalism in the Age of Polarization

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January 6th. Ottawa Convoy. 2022 German coup d'état plot. 2023 Brazil Congress Attack.

The connective tissue of these uprisings represents a new modern era of political polarization, driven by political disaffection and animus toward the democratic state. In all of these resurgences of creeping authoritarianism, the rioters claimed sovereignty over a democratically-elected government in the name of “freedom”. However, to chalk these trends up to just polarization is reductive and confuses the direction of cause and effect. It is not that polarization caused the aforementioned uprisings, rather these are trends that existed before 2021 and have only accelerated during a pandemic that left people isolated, scared and feeling powerless. Navigating a rapidly changing world with rapid technological change, rising economic inequalities, exposure of marginalized communities, the failure of government to deliver on public services and a growing plutocracy has given way to a political culture that is oppositional, sensationalized, and rife with misinformation. And these trends have only intensified as the cost-of-living crisis introduces another layer of anxiety on top of a tight ball of stress that the pandemic introduced.

Our ability to contextualize the world around us through reliable information is the job of the free press; it serves as a conduit through which information about our public institutions is communicated. This role as the “eyes and ears” of the Canadian citizenry¹ is enshrined in Section 2(b) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Without the free press we cannot hold power to account. However, journalism itself is in peril: its ability to perform its function, while necessary for a democratic state to function, is in question as mounting crises accrue. The resulting layoffs, cutbacks, lack of diversity, disappearance of local news, technological disruption, and increasing reliance on freelancers due to dwindling resources, expose a crumbling pillar of democracy that is unfolding concurrently with the rising sense of political polarization. We may not be as polarized as a country, as much as we know that things aren't working for the country and have chosen different avenues through which we react. The retrenchment of journalism to inform us of what is wrong and explain how we got here has created a relevance gap between the profession and its ability to deliver on its mandate to serve the public. It is in this differential that misinformation takes root and flourishes with promises to fill that gap. At the gate are bad-faith actors looking to build large audiences with whom they can monetize their content. It is in the intersection of these nefarious trends that journalism finds itself at the Twilight of Rome.

Democratic Backsliding

On January 29, 2022, hundreds of truckers, named the “Freedom Convoy”, occupied downtown Ottawa for three weeks. In addition, similar convoys popped up in Coutts, Alberta and at the Ambassador Bridge in Windsor, ostensibly to protest the COVID-19 vaccine requirement for commercial truck drivers crossing the Canada-U.S. border, imposed by both the American and Canadian governments to stifle the spread of COVID-19. Journalists covering the convoy and downtown Ottawa residents faced hostility, harassment, and violence. The Ottawa People's Commission, a non-partisan group of community residents formed as a response to the convoy, held public hearings² to examine the extent of its impact on the residents. Their assessment, described in Part 1 of the final report,³ refuted the narrative advanced by some news media that the convoy was a peaceful protest:⁴

“Throughout most of February 2022, the thousands of people who live and work in downtown Ottawa endured several weeks of widespread human rights abuse, amidst a climate of threats, fear, sexual harassment and intimidation marked by racism, misogyny, antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and other expressions of hate and intolerance. The impact was, inevitably, greatest on the most vulnerable individuals and communities.⁵”

— Ottawa People’s Commission

What was missed by some in news media were the far-right elements present in the leadership and its many supporters. Convoy leadership presented a Memorandum of Understanding that called for a committee of unelected individuals to replace the current democratically-elected government.⁶ Coverage of the convoy allowed for more understanding for these “protesters” than those from the Ottawa Black Diaspora Coalition who, in 2020, blocked an important downtown street to protest racial injustice. In some circles, the convoy coverage was described as “fawning.”⁷

What the occupiers and many downtown Ottawa community residents shared was a distrust of news media to tell their stories accurately. The former led to harassment of journalists, the latter led to a disengagement and retreat from mainstream news media to their own trusted sources. Both sentiments spell trouble for mainstream Canadian media and the future of journalism.

“These events are perhaps the most extreme expression of the decline in overall trust in news over the past four years, from 58% to 42%, including a three-point fall this year. Canada still remains among the countries with relatively higher trust levels, but this position is not as reassuring as in previous years.⁸”

— Reuters Institute’s 2022 Digital News Report

There has been a radical transformation of the news industry—and journalism writ large—due to the internet and social media. News and information can be obtained from a wider array of sources, both credible and spurious, giving the public the ability to curate their own news world. Anyone can establish themselves as a news authority with the ability to capture a large audience due to the ease and speed of the distribution of information on social media. Who the truth-tellers and storytellers that can be trusted to deliver credible, reliable, and relevant information are is something that many people continue to discover as they assemble their media diet. Unfortunately, it has become burdensome for the public to tease out what journalism is from the larger volume of content on the internet. The frustration and mistrust this exercise generates can cause the public to disengage.

“Journalists have a crucial function to play in a democracy. The notion of a free press and the true existence of it is an indicator of a healthy democracy. So if journalists are increasingly minimized, marginalized, don’t have access to the information they need to inform the public, to inform the electorate, then that’s an indicator of democratic backsliding.⁹”

— Sabreena Delhon, Executive Director at the Samara Centre for Democracy

Losing Relevance

Democratic institutions need to evolve to stay relevant, otherwise they risk alienating the communities they’re meant to serve, leading to polarization. A dominant feature of Canadian

culture is risk aversion, where consequentially the risk of inaction is often under-explored—and that’s the risk our institutions are currently experiencing. Tradition is often justified to uphold old-fashioned approaches, refusing to evolve, and eventually becoming stuck and irrelevant as a consequence.

“Their inability to evolve... has created a gap and that’s readily being filled by all sorts of nefarious actors. That’s where the disinformation and misinformation, the anti-vaccine sensibility, the decline of the expert, that’s where those things can come in and fill that gap.¹⁰”

— Sabreena Delhon, Executive Director at the Samara Centre for Democracy

The communities have also evolved over time and have become more diverse in identity and need. This has the effect of expanding the gap between journalistic output and communities’ needs and interests. When news media do not reflect the communities they serve, those communities become disaffected and turn to other less reliable forms of content that often confirm their biases, and open them to misinformation. Journalism, on the other hand, has a problem recruiting and retaining the diverse problem-solvers they need to steer them through these uncertain times. The ability to diversify their workforce and update their practices to reflect the body politic would enable them to evolve in a way to help address the gap.

“There’s far too much stenography going on in the business. And that results in scads and scads of inches wasted on stuff that people don’t care about. ¹¹”

— Darren Krause, Founder and Editor of Livewire Calgary

Unfortunately, the digital environment is squeezing the production schedule and resources that remain. This digital landscape fosters overstimulation and therefore increases demand for more information, faster. The “feed the beast” mentality takes hold, which incentivizes news companies to produce low-hanging fruit—the easy stuff for news orgs to put on the web and push out the door. With ever-dwindling resources, the pressure to find more efficient ways of producing news is even greater. This means that investigative deep dives that explore systemic issues and textured storytelling become secondary to hot takes and attention-grabbing headlines that can be easily retweeted and shared on social media networks.

The Canadian Association of Journalists assembled a survey to measure the diversity of Canadian newsrooms. The results demonstrate an industry that refuses to diversify, despite calls to do so two-and-a-half years after the murder of George Floyd that inspired global uprisings protesting anti-Black racism and police brutality.

“The survey showed that there is a lack of diversity in Canadian media, specifically in supervisor and full-time roles. We learned that 82.9 per cent of supervisors are white, while only 50.6 per cent of interns are white. Overall, women outnumber men by a small amount in newsrooms, but still tend to be over-represented in part-time and intern roles.¹²”

— Canadian Association of Journalists Diversity Survey

About 80 percent of newsrooms have zero Black or Indigenous reporters on staff; 77 percent have no visible minorities or Indigenous people in top leadership roles in the organizations. While the citizenry diversifies, newsrooms remain white, and those making decisions on which stories are

important and how they must be covered come from a monolithic lens that has not changed, even after promising to do so.¹³ Statistics Canada forecasts that by 2041, the racialized population could account for as much as 43 percent of the Canadian population, nearly double the proportion in 2016, at 22 percent. In maintaining white-centred structures, Canadian newsrooms alienate themselves from growing communities and therefore a growing potential readership base; they may also be alienating current and future generations.

The Truth is Paywalled, The Lies Are Free

Democracies depend on community engagement to function. Engagement is defined as those who invest in community improvement, including attending public meetings, rallies, communicating with public officials and institutions and/or working with others in their community to identify and solve local problems. An engaged citizenry is less likely to become manipulated by misinformation. Reboot Foundation, an organization whose aim is to elevate critical thinking, conducted an online survey¹⁵ ahead of the 2022 American midterms. Its findings connected civic engagement with misinformation:

“People who are more engaged in their communities have more faith in elections and in their abilities to spot misinformation. High engagers were 67 percent more likely to say they had encountered election misinformation compared to those with low community engagement.¹⁶”

— Reboot Foundation

Journalists who build relationships in their communities ensure the relevance of their work to those communities; it changes which stories are important, or what news is. From this perspective, the product is not the output, it’s the relationship between the audience and the story. This is a new way of thinking of journalism, which brings stories back to local, community-led sources and stakeholders. Smaller, more locally-targeted stories resonate with people and lead them to become more engaged with their neighbours. This reduces suspicion and mistrust of one another, which would aid in reducing polarization.

“At its most powerful, engagement is not a layer to add on top of conventional journalistic practice, but a firmer foundation that links journalism more closely with the people it aims to serve.¹⁷”

— American Press Institute

This model of journalism can boost the bottom line, since it requires investment by the audience that opens avenues of support. It is a model, however, that requires time to build connections to form sustainable partnerships and identifiable stakeholders. Most importantly, it builds trust in reporting. Sadly, the vicious cycle of news production in a digital world precludes the time and attention necessary to build these relationships of trusted sources and an invested audience. Nevertheless, this is one of the most powerful ways of fighting misinformation and can be a path to sustainable journalism.

Interestingly, this is a model loosely used by activists. Paradoxically, the space opened by the widening gap between media and the communities they serve has given breath to social movements and marginalized voices to shift the Overton window on what is acceptable discourse in news media. A prime example of this is the prominence of Black Twitter, which has challenged

traditional media's reporting on police brutality, anti-blackness and racism in journalism and media, making the Black Lives Matter movement a household name. They have also challenged the journalistic tenet of objectivity¹⁸ as a construct of whiteness, from which marginalized journalists are excluded by construction. Most importantly, the gap has given platforms to viewpoints that have fed oxygen into debates, exemplifying an aspirational function of democracy.

How We Got Here

The prevailing narrative of the abysmal state of the Canadian journalism industry sounds like this: journalism was a functioning pillar of society until the internet came along, disrupted the industry, stole its advertising dollars and sucked journalism dry. While this is a version of history that sells well to politicians, the truth is that the consolidation of news media and government regulatory failures created a vulnerable environment for technological disruption to occur. We are still living with the consequences of the consolidation of media in the 1990s and 2000s. Though some would harken the decline back to 1980 when, after 90 and 95 years, the Winnipeg Tribune and the Ottawa Journal, respectively, closed their doors due to backdoor dealings between the Thomson and Southam organizations that owned those publications. The Kent Commission¹⁹ was formed days later, which recommended that newspapers should be prevented from merging with television and radio, known as cross-media ownership. That recommendation was dropped by the Mulroney government and paved the way for Canada to have one of the highest concentrations of media ownership in the world.²⁰

Fast forward to 1996 when Conrad Black bought the Southam organization, the largest publisher of daily newspapers in the country, and in 2000 he sold Southam Inc to CanWest Global Communication Corporation. It was between these years Black started the National Post, which was eventually sold to an American hedge fund, despite regulations against foreign ownership of newspapers.

“We are now dealing with the consequences of convergence and picking up the pieces of a media system that has been battered by technological change, regulatory neglect (as a 2006 Senate report termed it) and no small amount of ownership connivance. As a result, we now have levels of ownership concentration and vertical integration—carriage companies owning television networks—that are among the highest in the world.²¹”

— Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

The 2000s also witnessed the vertical integration of television, radio and cable companies. Rogers, Bell Canada Enterprises, and Quebecor all conducted massive buying sprees of television and radio stations to vertically integrate cable and content. They later became the same companies that offered internet to Canadians through the same business model that made Canada home to some of the most expensive internet services in the world.²² Years of media convergence has created a media environment of vertical integration and a reduced diversity of editorial perspectives, and it was done under the noses of both the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), which regulates the broadcasting sector and the Competition Bureau, and ensures competition through economic analysis of the private sector. It is poised to become worse with the Rogers \$26 billion takeover bid for Shaw Communications that is currently under review.

“As for the CRTC, wherever its mandate was engaged with respect to these transactions, it offered its blessing and little to no sense that it would serve as a countervailing force to the processes of market consolidation.²³”

— Global Media and Internet Concentration Project, Carleton University

According to the 2006 Senate Report on news media,²⁴ the legislative and regulatory framework has failed journalism by foregoing support for the diversity of news. Criticism of the CRTC highlights its failure to stop consolidation of the industry by concentrating too much on policing Canadian content rules. The lax rules around cross-media ownership opened the door to a monolithic viewpoint of news that relied more of pleasing shareholders than serving the public. The Competition Bureau also faces criticism of its narrow application of its mandate that favours defining competition through market prices. Given that some access to news is free, advertising prices are used as a proxy, which introduces a distortion that affects their analysis. Public interest should not be a function of advertisers, since the two work for opposing results: advertisers want to sell to those who can afford to buy their products, incentivizing news coverage that would appeal to a certain race and class of society, while public interest demands the expansion and diversity of coverage to ensure wider participation.

News media still have not recovered from the entry of technology companies into an already vulnerable landscape some 15 years ago. This is partly because the industry did not fully explore the opportunities to work with this new medium. Keen use of particular divisions of distribution would take advantage of the comparative advantage of each medium. As Krause explained, a newspaper provides a tactile, design-heavy experience that can feature long-form, investigative journalism, while the web can focus on daily news and quick hits that work with the reduced attention span of readers while scrolling on their phone, tablet or laptop. This is one way newsrooms could work with technology, rather than succumbing to it

Today the journalism industry in general—and news media, specifically—are in dire straits. Local news is almost non-existent, meaning that a lot of communities are underserved and are primed for becoming radicalized through misinformation, exacerbating the polarization of society. In the latest round of Postmedia layoffs, it was announced that the Saskatoon StarPhoenix will be printed in a central location 470 km away, meaning that production deadlines are becoming tighter with little room for depth.

Meanwhile the industry is relying on a lot of contract and freelance work to service increasingly diverse communities, thereby providing the relevance piece that is increasingly missing from the newsroom. This has a destabilizing effect on the cohesion of journalistic output, which can cause confusion for the reader. Round after round of layoffs and cutbacks deprioritizes the attention that management gives to ensure relevant stories. In their eyes, the best way to save the industry is to save jobs, making everything else secondary. However, what decision-makers don’t necessarily acknowledge is that to save jobs, one must expand readership, and to do that, one must align their news stories to serve communities, not manors of power.

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